

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds
by Arturo Escobar

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1q70p8hh>

Journal

Anthropological Quarterly, 92(3)

ISSN

0003-5491

Author

Murphy, Keith M

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.1353/anq.2019.0038

Peer reviewed

Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. pp. 290

by Keith M. Murphy, UC Irvine

There is a simple question that almost always haunts the scholarly study of design, and around which many debates about design pivot, though the scholars and the debaters don't always raise the question in their work, or recognize how much it motivates their thinking: *is design good?* The question is rarely asked in this exact phrasing — usually, a Yes (most often) or a No (sometimes) is assumed, and an author proceeds from there, or the question itself is weighed down with so much lexical and syntactic dross that its basic underlying form is all but smothered in the theorizing. So the question continues its haunting, because the ways in which it is typically asked (or not) don't allow it to find any peaceful rest. However in his new book, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, Arturo Escobar — who stands decidedly as a Yes — offers us a compelling way out of the problem, because he asks the question differently; or rather, he shows us not *that* design is good, or even *how* it is good, but beautifully reveals to us *why* it can be good when put to proper use.

For several years, an unpublished (and quite different) version of this manuscript circulated among anthropologists and design researchers, who forwarded it along to one another like a digital sacred text. That earlier piece was a tour-de-force exploration of certain streams of research in design studies and sustainability — much of it material that anthropologists don't often read — and an argument for using them to counteract the worst proclivities of western thought in general, and development and anti-indigenous chauvinism in particular. In its current and more mature form, Escobar's enterprise is even more impressive, in terms of its organization, originality, and intellectual rigor. And while the book is full of questions, and even some answers, that original haunting query — *is design good?* — sits squarely at its center, only slightly submerged in the thinking and the prose. Indeed, one could phrase the premise of *Designs for the Pluriverse* as a courteous invitation from Escobar to explore the question with him, as if he's saying to the reader, "*I know you may be skeptical that design is definitely good, and I might be skeptical too, but I have some hope that design really can be used to make better worlds, and I want to show you why I think so.*"

Designs for the Pluriverse is not an ethnographic account of design, nor is it particularly concerned with convincing readers that design, as opposed to other possible frameworks, is the best lens through which to view contemporary world-making practices. Instead, Escobar spends most of the book constructing a robust conceptual armature using materials gleaned from a number of scholarly and activist fields — including design theory, political ecology, political ontology, and cognitive science, among others — and forcefully demonstrating the productive compatibility among them. In doing so, he constructs a complex "working hypothesis" (p. 224) that an *ontological* reconfiguration of design — that is, as primarily for and about forging possible ways of being — can provide a powerful mechanism for addressing some of the most pressing global crises. As such, the book is somewhat of an odd beast: it's partly a work of theory-formation, partly a reassessment of previous research by an influential anthropologist, and something near both a call-to-arms and a how-to manual for transforming design into a tool for massive change. It is also destined to become a classic in design anthropology, development studies, design research, and, I'd wager, a number of other fields, too.

The book is divided into three sections of two chapters each, plus an Introduction and Conclusion. In the first section, "Design for the Real World" (a direct homage to influential designer Victor Papanek), Escobar lays the theoretical foundation upon which the remainder of the text is built, and does so in such a way that

both design theorists and anthropologists gain familiarity with each others' background knowledge. For the former, this includes a critical review of work in participatory design, design for social innovation, and speculative design, among others (Chapter 1), and for the latter it includes design anthropology, the anthropology of development, political ecology, political ontology, and more (Chapter 2). These chapters alone are invaluable resources for scholars and students interested in these topics. In Part II, "The Ontological Reorientation of Design," Escobar undertakes an ontological re-evaluation of design theory, first by offering a re-reading of design primarily through the version of social cognition developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in the 1980s (Chapter 3), then by augmenting the concept of ontological design originally proposed by Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, also in the 1980s, by way of more recent anthropology and design theory (Chapter 4). By unpacking these perspectives alongside the design and social theory presented in the previous section, Escobar begins to give shape to a coherent configuration of design that is constituted primarily of and through ontologically-oriented concerns, in both practice and theory, one that is anti-dualist, collaborative, and structurally democratized.

All of this leads to Part III, the titular "Designs for the Pluriverse," in which Escobar attempts to show us what it all means. Chapter 5 is focused on different *transitions*, or movements from one communal way of being to another (e.g. degrowth and postdevelopment, perspectives that imagine new worlds unscarred by capitalism and colonialism), and how design has been, or can be, used to positively facilitate them. Chapter 6 is arguably the crux of Escobar's contribution, the forwarding of a concept of "autonomous design" in which communities work together to design their own future worlds. Significantly inspired by, and building from, the intellectual infrastructure of different social movements among indigenous and Afrodescendant communities in Latin America, Escobar uses the social and design theory he has already elaborated first to outline what an autonomous design would be, and then to apply it hypothetically to several case studies in South America. In all, the book is stuffed with fresh ideas, while at the same time offering a persuasive vision for how design, at least when approached in this new way, is absolutely something good.

While the book is, overall, quite masterful, I do have a few nits to pick. First, Escobar falls into the same trap that has swallowed all of us who work with design anthropologically (including me, elsewhere and in this very review): he talks about design in the singular, without fully exploring the complexity of the category. There are several common registers in which design is typically discussed, one of which is practical and boring — the nitty-gritty of everyday design work is mostly tedious and uneventful — and another of which is abstract and exalted — design has the power to change the world — and depending on which register one uses, different views of *what design is* will emerge. Because Escobar relies significantly on design theory, which is utterly replete with the latter register, the book tends to reproduce a lofty, abstract picture of design (one that doesn't always resonate with designing in action). I wonder how more attention to studies of actual, situated design practice (the practical and boring sides) would change the way design is figured in Escobar's argument.

Relatedly, when discussing certain kinds of design, especially those involving technology, architecture, or urban planning (which contemporary design theory heavily favors), its power to impact the world appears quite self-evident. But when we explore more diffident kinds of design, like those involving "background objects" like furniture, domestic hardware (like latches, pulls, and levers), typefaces, or textiles — basically all forms of design without a clear historical or current connection to engineering — then the rhetoric concerning design's power to change the world starts to sound a bit overwrought. This is not to argue that such things are inconsequential, of course, but that the self-evidence of design's power ceases to be so clear when we start our analysis from the design of demure things. All of which is to say, because Escobar draws on a particular body of literature in design theory with a particular ideological slant, then the argument he

builds with that literature tends to reproduce some of the same assumptions about what design is and the power it holds, and I'm left contemplating how a more grounded, ethnographic perspective on designing would change the concept of autonomous design.

Next, the commitment to the goodness of design that motivates the book is almost too credulous, almost too hopeful, and sometimes borders on uncritical. For example, Chapter 4 opens with a mildly controversial YouTube spoken-word artist called Prince Ea, whose quoted hip hop monologue (e.g., "*See, technology has made us more selfish and separate than ever / 'Cause while it claims to connect us, connection has gotten no better*") sounds like a reactionary "technology ruins social interaction" argument, as if Sherry Turkle enrolled in a beat poetry class at her local community center. And throughout the book, Escobar's language, or that of the people he cites, hews perilously close to woo-woo, like for instance (p. 13), "it is necessary to cultivate again the harmony of coexistence through the equality and unity of all living beings within the ongoing, recursive, and cyclical renovation of life." To some extent these kinds of examples represent simple differences in aesthetic opinion, and they don't undermine Escobar's central argument in any way. However I do think his point could be made even more strongly with a more skeptical and less optimistic view of design that doesn't rely too much on a blunt rhetoric of good and bad in its analysis.

Finally, I'd like to see a bit more reflection on the variety of ways in which design has the power to help enact transitions and build new worlds. At one point (p. 123) Escobar asks, "How, then, can one design a world that brings forth flourishing in everyday activities? Can cultural practices be changed by design?" If one is credulous and hopeful toward design, these questions invoke images of a brighter future; but if one is pessimistic and despondent about design, these questions are terrifying, because without a doubt, if design can be used intentionally to make a better world, it can also be used with equal intent to make the world much worse.

Despite the concerns I've raised, which are mostly the concerns of someone who has thought too much about design and how to talk about it over the years, I can emphatically state that *Designs for the Pluriverse*, like the stance taken by its author on design itself, is good. In fact, it's superb, and a welcome addition both to the expanding literature on design in anthropology, and to design theory more broadly. It's also a fascinating exhibit of the making, unmaking, and remaking of an accomplished scholar's intellectual trajectory in an updated mode, which makes the book essential reading for anyone moved by Escobar's earlier contributions to anthropology. Indeed, there are so many ways to read this book that almost anyone who picks it up will find something to think with.